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FM AMEMBASSY KINSHASA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8454  
INFO RUEHXR/RWANDA COLLECTIVE  
RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE  
RUZEJAA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KINSHASA 000777

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [KPKO](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [CG](#)

SUBJECT: Goma Report September 20:  
FARDC Offensive at Kimoka

¶1. (SBU) Summary: FARDC launched an early morning offensive September 20 into CNDP terrain north of Sake and in the course of the day was repelled by CNDP. The MONUC base at Kimoka was caught in the crossfire. This grave violation of the ceasefire came a half day after the Minister of Defense publicly reaffirmed the ceasefire. Both CNDP and FARDC blamed MONUC for inaction. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) At 5:05 am Saturday September 20, the FARDC launched an offensive from Sake into CNDP territory beyond the neutral zone at Kimoka and up the western escarpment above Sake and Kimoka. It sent four tanks and three BMP's up the Kimoka road and fired 60 rockets from a multi-barreled rocket launcher as well as mortars from Sake in the course of the morning and early afternoon. FARDC also flew and fired from its attack helicopters. By mid-morning CNDP had launched a counter-offensive, with what North Kivu brigade described as heavy fighting on the Kimoka ridge. By afternoon FARDC troops were observed running down the escarpment and down the Kimoka road. By late afternoon, when heavy rains commenced and after clear warnings from the North Kivu brigade, CNDP ceased its counteroffensive and returned to its original positions.

¶3. (SBU) FARDC provided no advance warning to MONUC about the offensive nor did it coordinate with MONUC in any way, even on the helicopter sorties. Repeated attempts by the North Kivu brigade to contact FARDC went unheeded until mid-morning. North Kivu brigade quickly evacuated its small base on "Celtel Ridge" back to its base at Kimoka, but the latter suffered several explosions of rockets and mortars, with two light injuries to its South African contingent. Various sources in North Kivu brigade provided varying accounts of FARDC casualties, from five to 25 dead. The heavily populated Kimoka area was afflicted by the crossfire from both sides, with untold civilians killed. Much of the population (perhaps 25,000 civilians) fled to the Indian battalion base east of Sake.

¶4. (SBU) The facilitation team met General Etumba (Joint Technical Commission co-chair) at 10:30. He was uncharacteristically subdued and almost apologetic, asserting that the Minister of Defense -- who the previous day had summoned the facilitation team and ostentatiously made a declaration of DRC's renewed commitment to the ceasefire and new disengagement plan -- "would be unhappy if FARDC had any responsibility in" the morning's military developments at Kimoka. However, he also asserted that the FARDC had had to react to information suggesting an imminent CNDP attack on Sake and Masisi. During the meeting Etumba received a call from Force Commander General Gaye, who Etumba admitted was "extremely angry." Eastern Coordinator Alpha Sow told Etumba that North Kivu brigade was "absolutely certain" that responsibility for the morning's attack lay entirely with the FARDC. He expressed astonishment to Etumba that this attack occurred a half day after Okapi Radio had published the Minister of Defense's reaffirmation of the ceasefire. FARDC, he continued, had not merely fired its heavy artillery, with horrendous consequences for the local populace as well as injury to MONUC, it had advanced well into CNDP territory and had brushed aside all of MONUC's efforts to make contact and stop the attack.

Etumba speculated that "rogue elements" may have inspired the attack but concluded that MONUC needed to act immediately to stop the CNDP counteroffensive.

15. (SBU) Deputy Chief of Staff Col. Cunliffe reported to the facilitation team in late afternoon on a long meeting he had just had with FARDC Kivus commander, General Marcelin Lukama. Lukama admitted to Cunliffe that FARDC had launched a "pre-emptive attack" on CNDP, both to forestall an imminent CNDP attack on Sake and Kirotse and to relieve pressure in the Masisi sector, where CNDP was expected to continue its earlier efforts to attack Masisi and Katale. Lukama did not say that he had received orders from above. (Note: Lukama, however, is a careful officer who does not appear the type to make a bold and risky initiative without orders. End Note.) Lukama complained that MONUC had offered FARDC no assistance and that MONUC had intervened too late in warning CNDP off its counter-offensive.

16. (SBU) Sow and poloff separately contacted CNDP officer Bertrand Bisimwa in the course of the morning to urge cessation of CNDP's counteroffensive. Bisimwa was extremely bitter about the one-sidedness of MONUC's recent interventions, including the previous day's helicopter attacks against CNDP. He asked how we could ask CNDP not to counterattack, when MONUC had, he asserted, done nothing to prevent the early-morning offensive by FARDC. He said that CNDP would not stop its counter-offensive unless FARDC ceased its artillery attacks (which continued into the afternoon) and unless MONUC publicly condemned the FARDC offensive. (In fact, CNDP stopped its counter-offensive, and pulled its forces back to previous positions, without any such declaration having yet been published from MONUC.)

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17. (SBU) On the evening of September 19, poloff received a telephonic message from CNDP officer Jean-Desire Muiti asking whether the U.S. government had positively considered CNDP's request for a meeting outside the country. Poloff responded with a brief message, "We assure your safety in a meeting here." On the morning of September 20, Muiti sent another message, asking whether the possibility of a meeting abroad were excluded. Poloff responded with a message stressing that there was immediate need for a meeting between Nkunda and the MONUC Force Commander to stop the fighting, which meeting could take place at Kirolirwe or at a safe MONUC installation, and that CNDP should contact Alpha Sow for arrangements. Muiti responded with a third message, that he would convey this message to the Chairman (Nkunda) and contact poloff in the evening. There was no further contact September 20. (Note: Cellular contact was generally disrupted in Goma throughout the day and evening. End note.)

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